



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 27, 2013

By Sgt. Edward Eagerton

Alaska Air Guardsmen train in California desert joint-forces exercise

PALM SPRINGS, California—Fifteen Airmen with the Alaska Air National Guard's 176th Wing took part in a 28-day Integrated Training Exercise at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, Calif., in October and November.

The exercise consisted of core competency training and a mission rehearsal exercise for units to increase their knowledge and experience in preparation for possible overseas deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

"The training was excellent," said Capt. Hans Jagow, a navigator with the 176th Operations Support Squadron, Group Tactics Shop, Alaska Air National Guard. "I've never seen an area that more closely resembles desert warfare. I've been to Afghanistan, and when you're sitting out there on that Marine Corps airstrip, you wouldn't know that you're in California. It looks a lot like Afghanistan."

The Alaska Guardsmen were there to work with other units and branches of service in a fully integrated, scenario based exercise.

"We set up an isolated personnel scenario and also a mass-casualty scenario," said Jagow. "Those were the two large-force exercises we were able to integrate with."

The missions each day started in the cool morning hours as the sun climbed and lit up the mountains of nearby Joshua Tree National Park, looming over the Palm Springs International Airport. Parked in an area across the runway from the main terminal, the ground maintenance crew began prepping the HC-130 "King" aircraft from the 211th RQS for the days' missions.

"We like to show up a couple of hours before their flight to look the plane over," said Staff Sgt. Stewart Andringa, an aerospace propulsion technician with the 176th Maintenance Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard. "We're the ground maintenance crew. When the plane takes off, if it comes back with a maintenance issue, we're here to fix it."

Sitting atop the plane, the Alaska state flag whips about in the sharp desert wind that cuts through the valley. This flag, the crew said, has been all around the world with the plane, “a sort of tradition.” In the background, the sounds of roaring engines from commuter planes coming and going fill the morning air with purpose.

While the plane is being checked out, refueled, and prepped for flight, the flight crew shows up and prepares for the day. Radio frequencies are confirmed, locations plotted and discussed, execution checklists followed, all to make sure that the mission goes as planned.

Adding to the chorus of airport sounds echoing across the airfield, the plane’s auxiliary power unit is turned on, screeching as the aircraft comes to life. Soon the engines, one by one, are turned as the ground crew and one of the loadmasters—plugged into a headset to communicate with the flight crew—directs the pilots to start each engine. Once the engines are warmed up, the ground crew guides the plane out to the runway, where she sits until given clearance to take off by the control tower.

With a green light from the tower, the engines thrust with a convulsive vibration, sending the plane charging down the runway. Laws of gravity and equilibrium contort as the nose of the plane rotates up—climbing sharply into the sky, banking to find its course, and following an invisible road in the air over mountains—north to the training area.

Each day of the exercise began in this manner, but once in the air, the mission was different every day. Master Sgt. Heidi Gould and Senior Airman Brian Rhodes, both loadmasters with the 211th RQS, had to switch gears with each changing mission.

“My job as a loadmaster is to handle everything in the cargo compartment of the aircraft,” said Rhodes. “Weight and balance is a basic part of the job, but with rescue missions, we also do lots of airdrops, helicopter midair refueling, infiltration/exfiltration missions, medical evacuations, the list goes on and on.”

On one mission, nestled in the dusty expanse of desert and mountains that make up the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, a team of pararescuemen from the U.S. Air Force’s 306th Rescue Squadron, waited to be picked up at a small airstrip. The primary function of pararescuemen, also known as Guardian Angels, are as highly trained personnel recovery specialists, with emergency medical capabilities in humanitarian and combat environments.

Upon reaching the airstrip, the HC-130 banked, made visual confirmation of the approach, lined up and landed. Wheels hit the runway with a loud thud and engines screamed at the short stop. Gould and Rhodes lowered the tail of the plane, communicating with flight crew that the wings were clear of any obstructions as it came to a stop.

Behind the plane, in a muted yellow-brown cloud kicked up by the engines, the Guardian Angel team stood waiting, already rigged up in parachutes for a high altitude, low opening insertion mission. Rhodes then gave the Guardian Angels a thumbs up, who then boarded from the ramp as the plane’s props continued to spit out clouds of dust as the bright blue sky became lost in the fog of desert sand flying about.

Inside the plane, they checked their gear, discussed safety procedures for the jump, and sat anticipating the coming jump. The plane launched out of the small desert airfield and circled higher and higher into the sky. The flight crew donned their oxygen masks and began prepping the plane to open up and let the rescue team out, 13,000 feet above the desert floor.

Hints of sunlight moved across walls of the interior from a few small windows as the plane circled, the light otherwise dim. When the ramp opened, light from outside flooded in, everything glowing in the evening sun's amber hue.

A team of four stepped to the ramp's edge—smiling in the thrill and adrenaline rush of their task at hand—and with a quick count, jumped out of the aircraft with their arms locked in a circle. They were followed by the rest of the team, all floating out the tail of the plane, at first like balloons, hovering for just a moment in the vortex of the draft and then suddenly dropping and disappearing in the landscape below.

The ramp closed after loadmasters ensured that everyone had exited, and then the plane banked, descended, and went on to practice low-level passes. Crewmembers buckled in, and through the small windows, mountains sped by, reaching above the plane as it snaked through a valley of giant boulder-covered hills and peaks. After practicing the maneuvers, the plane headed back to the airfield and picked up the same team, ready for their second jump of the day.

Each day presented a new mission, all falling in line with the exercise being conducted on the ground. The 306th Guardian Angel team, along with HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters from the U.S. Air Force's 66th Rescue Squadron, were called in when, during a simulated incident, Marines from the Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron 1, were injured when their vehicle struck an IED. The Marines called in for medical evacuation of their wounded, and the rescue team swooped in and retrieved the injured Marines.

Once again, the HC-130 crew was called upon to support the mission. In this case, they were to practice a mass casualty evacuation by landing on a dirt airstrip, meeting up with the Guardian Angels, who then transferred the casualties to the crew of the HC-130.

"In a mass casualty exercise, there's a simulation of a bomb that went off, resulting in multiple injuries and we have to extract multiple people back to a casualty collection point," said Jagow. "On the HC-130, we're responsible for loading up those casualties and getting them back to higher echelons of care."

The mission was lightning fast, with the plane landing on the dirt airstrip, kicking up clouds of sand. The Pave Hawks rolled in, flying low over the hills, and came to land behind the HC-130. Moving as though they were transferring real casualties, the Guardian Angels moved the critically wounded Marines on stretchers into the plane and then moved others with less critical injuries until the back of the plane transformed into a mobile casualty collection point.

Other missions included nighttime mid-air refueling of Pave Hawks. Crewmembers donned their night vision goggles and loadmasters hooked up to harnesses—rigged to prevent them from falling off the ramp but with enough slack in the safety line to sit at the edge. From their perch, loadmasters helped guide the helicopters' refueling boom into the fuel line dangling from the tank under the wing.

Their eyes glowed green as they watched helicopters dance behind the plane, slowly moving in until contact was made between the boom extending out from under the spinning rotors and the fuel line. The danger of the moment was accentuated by the helicopter catching turbulence from the plane, but the flight crew's expert training compensated for every nuance of wind and speed. Another mission was performed flawlessly as the helicopters broke contact and sunk back into the sky, leaving only a trace of their presence with flashing lights getting smaller as they turned away.

The last day's mission for the Airmen was an airdrop operation. Palletized four-wheelers, fixed with parachutes and cardboard padding to protect them from the landing, were loaded onto the back of the HC-130, once again at the small airfield in Twentynine Palms.

A Guardian Angel team loaded onto the HC-130, outfitted with full combat loads and static line parachutes. The mission was to drop the off-road vehicles in a low pass, then circle around on another pass with the Guardian Angels performing a static-line jump over their equipment. The scenario was to rescue a downed pilot.

"In an isolated personnel setting, we go out, locate and identify a survivor and then work with the HH-60s and Guardian Angels to go in and extract that survivor and get them back to safety," explained Jagow.

Once the team and their equipment were loaded, the plane took off and identified the location of the simulated downed pilot. Over the target, the loadmaster pushed the pallets off the ramp, their chutes deploying and slowing them to a slow and sustainable fall.

As the equipment floated down to the desert floor, the plane circled back as the Guardian Angels stood up and connected their static-lines to a cable designed to activate their parachutes upon exiting the aircraft. Over the target again, they quickly jumped from the ramp, their chutes catching the wind and slowing them from the speed of flight, down to a slow controllable fall.

The loadmasters then retrieved the dangling static lines, closed the doors, and began the process of securing any remaining equipment that would be returned once they landed on the ground. With the conclusion of this mission, the crew of the HC-130 returned to Palm Springs International Airport, and debriefed on the mission. The following day, they began their trip back to Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, their skills enhanced, ready for the next mission.

"I think one of the better things about the training down here is that you get out of your comfort zone," said Rhodes. "In Alaska, you get into the routine of doing the same drops, the same training scenarios. Down here, it being a joint forces exercise with the Marines, we got to see and do some things we don't normally do. It was a great opportunity for us to come down here and work with other units we don't normally work with."

###

Note to editors: Interview and B-roll is on the Alaska National Guard DVIDS page at <http://www.dvidshub.net/unit/ANGPA>.

Cutlines:

131118-Z-MW427-089

Tech. Sgt. Ryan Conti, a flight engineer with the 211th Rescue Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, identifies the landing zone while returning to the Palm Springs International Airport, Palm Springs, Calif., Nov. 18. The Guardsmen from the 211th RQS participated in an Integrated Training Exercise at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Training Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif., which is an exercise designed to validate units before deploying to Afghanistan. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Edward Eagerton

131119-Z-MW427-159

An HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter from the 66th Rescue Squadron, U.S. Air Force, lands behind an HC-130 "King" aircraft from the 211th Rescue Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, during a training mission at the Marine Corps Air Ground Training Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif., Nov. 19. The Airmen from the 211th RQS were there participating in an Integrated Training Exercise, which is designed to validate units before deploying to Afghanistan. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Edward Eagerton

131120-Z-MW427-333

Guardian Angels with the 306th Rescue Squadron, U.S. Air Force, jump off the ramp of an Alaska Air National Guard HC-130 "King" aircraft during an airborne operation over the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Training Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif., Nov. 20. The airmen were there taking part in an Integrated Training Exercise, which is an exercise designed to validate units before deploying to Afghanistan. U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Edward Eagerton